

Sister Anne Marie Gardiner fdnsc, AM

As a 22-year-old, Sister Anne Gardiner, a member of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, was asked to move to Bathurst Island, the smaller of the two Tiwi Islands, 80km north of Darwin. Sister Anne accepted the mission and was ready to change the world.

Yet many questions went through her mind. She asked Bishop Francis Xavier Gsell, the founder of the Tiwi Catholic mission, what she would do there, he told her: “Love them.”

Apart from six years of teaching in Nauru and four in Darwin, Sister Anne has wholeheartedly devoted her life to doing just that for more than five decades. Now 86 years old, Sister Anne continues to live on Bathurst Island, where she has supported Tiwi culture and heritage, enriched the community and contributed to the education of multiple generations.

Embodying the spirit of openness and dialogue that is integral to the Catholic intellectual tradition, Sister Anne maintained the importance of education as a right. She ran the island school for more than four decades, teaching multiple generations of Tiwi children.

In turn, she was a student herself: “The Tiwi people have taught me loyalty, their ability to forgive, their strong sense of humour which keeps you going, their friendship and their directness”, she says.

Though English only was originally taught in the school, it eventually became bilingual with the help of Sister Tess Ward, who contributed to learning the Tiwi language and translating it into English. Since then, Sister Anne has continued that mission of linguistic and cultural preservation by establishing the Tiwi Heritage Museum, known as *Patakijiyali*, on the island.

Beyond attracting tourists, the museum is an achievement that brings Tiwi culture to life, preserving it for future generations, while showcasing the island’s proud sporting heritage.

Sister Anne secured government funding to extend the museum and develop interactive exhibitions. After collaborating with the community, especially Tiwi women, for more than 10 years on the project, Sister Anne handed over the keys to

the museum to four Tiwi women. These women included two young Tiwi women who are in training, and Fiona Kerinaia and Magdalen Kelantumama, whom are both present here with us this evening.

After retiring as principal of the local primary school, Sister Anne continued her community involvement by running regular prayer meetings, founding an op shop and establishing a coffee shop where community members from different families can mingle.

Recognised as a cornerstone of the community, Sister Anne became the Senior Australian of the Year in 2017 after being nominated by the Northern Territory for her lifelong work on the island. She proudly draped the Tiwi flag over her shoulder as she accepted the award, which she says took “a long time to sink in”. The accolade demonstrates the extent of Sister Anne’s contribution to preserving Tiwi culture and Aboriginal culture more broadly.

Reflecting on her time spent living alongside the Tiwi people, Sister Anne says: “I am very, very grateful for the time I’ve spent with them.”

Instrumental in advancing the cause of Indigenous recognition in Australia, Sister Anne has made significant contributions to education and Tiwi culture while living and working on Bathurst Island – contributions that will endure for future generations to come.

“I wouldn’t be there if it hadn’t been for my congregation and the Tiwi people”, she says. On receiving her honorary doctorate, Sister Anne adds: “This award is not a personal award to me; it goes to my sisters and the Tiwi people.”